

1. INTRODUCTION

Congress, under the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act of 1992 (P.L. 102-295), required that a study of the national incidence of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of elderly persons be conducted. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has responsibility for administering the provisions of this legislation. The ACF combined resources and expertise with the Administration on Aging (AoA) and jointly funded the study as a research activity of the AoA-supported National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA).

The American Public Welfare Association,¹ the lead organization for the NCEA, and its subcontractor, Westat, Inc., a survey research company located in Rockville, Maryland, conducted the study between October 1994 and December 1997. Because the legislative mandate primarily was concerned with the prevention of violence in domestic settings, the study focused only on the maltreatment of non-institutionalized elderly. Elders living in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, or other institutional or group facilities were not included in the report.

The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS) utilized a sentinel research design. This methodology for collecting data from nationally representative samples was new to the field of elder abuse, but this methodology already had been used for federally supported national incidence studies of child abuse and neglect, for example the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) by Westat for the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect in ACF. Within ACF and other professional communities, the sentinel data collection approach has been accepted as a less costly alternative to a general population survey.

Accordingly, using a sentinel methodology, NEAIS collected data from two different sources in a nationally representative probability sample of 20 counties: (1) local Adult Protective Services (APS) agencies or the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA); and (2) approximately 1,100 trained "sentinels" from public and private agencies that had frequent contact with elderly community residents. The function of the sentinels was to be on the lookout for incidents of elder abuse and to document each event that met the study's definitions. Many sentinels were mandatory or voluntary reporters of elder abuse as defined by

¹ Association members voted to change the name of the American Public Welfare Association to the American Public Human Services Association in July 1998, and it is hereafter referred to as APHSA.

state laws and were employed by a variety of organizations (e.g., elder care providers, hospitals and clinics, law enforcement agencies, and financial institutions).

Most previous attempts to generate national data on domestic elder abuse in the United States relied on statistics of suspected elder abuse compiled by states. Over the past 20 years, states have become increasingly concerned with the problem of elder abuse, both domestic and institutional, and have enacted laws to prevent and treat the problem. As a result, all states now have statutes addressing elder abuse. Most elder abuse laws require that certain professionals report all suspected incidents of elder maltreatment to officially designated report-receiving agencies. Eight states (Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) administer domestic elder abuse laws, but make elder abuse reporting voluntary. In some states, like Massachusetts, the elder for whom a report of suspected abuse has been made may refuse an investigation. Both the states with laws on mandatory reporting and those where reporting is voluntary regularly gather statistics on reports of elder abuse, although the comprehensiveness of elder abuse information systems varies considerably from state to state.

The National Center on Elder Abuse, in a 1995 report (Tatara, 1995), documented 71 laws in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands that address abuse, neglect, and exploitation of elders. Across these 71 state laws, the five most common information elements are: (1) type of person covered by the law; (2) definitions of elder abuse, (3) reporter immunity, (4) age of persons covered by the law, and (5) agency designated to receive reports. Other elements include: the timing/method of reporting, mandatory reporting requirements, mandatory reporters, involvement of law enforcement, and confidentiality of client information.

Following the intake of a report of alleged abuse in an agency designated to receive these reports, such as APS, the case is assigned to a protective service worker for investigation. The length of time that elapses prior to the investigation varies both by state and by the nature of the abuse. Thirty states currently have laws that include provisions concerning the timing of investigating elder abuse reports. Five states (Alabama, District of Columbia, Florida, Idaho, and New Hampshire) require that reports involving a life-threatening or emergency situation be investigated immediately; five states (Guam, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, and Virgin Islands) specify that a report involving a life-threatening situation must be investigated within 24 hours; and 13 states (Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, and Virginia) have laws requiring that all reports must be investigated "as soon as possible," but do not specify a particular amount of time.

Once an investigation of an alleged elder abuse incident has begun, a case still may be "referred" to another agency for intervention or services. A case may be found substantiated, unsubstantiated, or in some states, "indicated but not confirmed." The requirements for case disposition vary by state.

This study explicitly has been designed to measure the incidence of elder abuse and neglect rather than prevalence. The term incidence refers to new cases occurring during a specific period of time (Freeman and Sherwood, 1970). In contrast to incidence, prevalence refers to the total number of ongoing cases in a given population at a designated point in time. Prevalence is similar to a census and does not address when the abuse or neglect occurred. The NEAIS examines the incidence of newly filed reports of abuse and neglect during calendar year 1996. Ongoing cases which were not reported or identified during the study period (e.g., the abuse occurred prior to 1996) are not counted.

In order to maximize the utility of the research, the study also collected and analyzed data about elder self-neglect in domestic settings, and these findings generally are reported separately from the findings for abuse and neglect. In the NEAIS, the phrase "elder maltreatment" refers to the seven types of abuse and neglect that are measured in the study, which are carefully defined later in this report. The incidence estimates calculated are for unduplicated elderly persons. In other words, individuals are counted only once, even if: (1) they were abused and neglected and/or self-neglecting, (2) more than one report were received about the same incident, or (3) different incidents were reported for the same elderly person during the study period

The Organization of This Report

This final report of the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS) contains estimates of the national incidence of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older people in domestic settings and information about the characteristics of elder abuse perpetrators and victims, including self-neglecting elders. The report is organized into four additional chapters:

Chapter Two provides background about prior efforts to measure elder abuse and neglect.

Chapter Three details the inception of the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study and the reasons for conducting this important research. This chapter also provides an overview of the study design

and discusses why a sentinel approach was used. Definitions of elder abuse, neglect, exploitation, and self-neglect are presented, as are the sampling plan for the study, instrument development, and recruitment and training procedures for APS and sentinel agencies. In addition, data collection processes and data handling are discussed, along with methods for weighting the data.

Chapter Four provides the findings from the NEAIS, from the estimated national incidence of abuse and neglect of elderly people, to in-depth analyses of characteristics of the abused, neglected, and self-neglecting elderly, those who were perpetrators of this abuse and neglect, and those who reported this abuse or neglect.

Chapter Five provides the summary, recommendations, and conclusions of this study.

